



Re-: An Errant Glossary, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 133–39

DANIEL REEVE 

Resolution

CITE AS:

Daniel Reeve, 'Resolution', in *Re-: An Errant Glossary*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 133–39 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-15_17>

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

© by the author(s)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

ABSTRACT: Many parodies operate through temporal strategies that distort the narrative proportions of their targets. This essay discusses two texts that manipulate time for parodic purposes: the contemporary animated sitcom *Bojack Horseman* and the twelfth-century romance *Ipomedon*. Their shared method involves the absurd prolongation of narrative structures of resolution and satisfaction in order to reveal these structures' arbitrary nature. But this method, in turn, shows that resolution — a retrospective determination of shape and meaning — can never be avoided entirely, even if it can be deferred.

Resolution

DANIEL REEVE

The classic family sitcom characteristically builds resolution into its 22-minute structure. Each episode sets up a moralizing conclusion in which one or more characters learn something — for example, to trust a loved one, or to take a step towards a longer-term personal change. But this mechanism is cynical because genuine progress is inimical to the genre's episodic form.¹ If a sitcom is premised on its main characters having certain flaws (and they almost universally are), then any attempt to address those flaws outside the arc of a single episode is a departure from what made the show interesting in the first place. These mechanisms become frequently parodied, though never fully superseded, in later works — from *Seinfeld*, with Larry David's much-quoted refusal to allow the show's characters any personal development whatsoever ('No hugging. No learning.'). to the recent Netflix animated drama *Bojack Horseman*.² In this show, the eponymous main character is the former star of *Horsin' Around*, a saccharine

1 See Daniel Reeve, 'Repetition', in this volume.

2 *Seinfeld*, created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld (NBC, 1989–1998); *Bojack Horseman*, created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg (Netflix, 2014–).

90s family sitcom recognizable as a parody of the popular ABC sitcom *Full House*.³ We meet Bojack in 2014: a depressed figure, who has barely worked since his sitcom's cancellation twenty years earlier, he compulsively rewatches his own show, obsessed with the possibility of satisfying closure, and imagines its credit reel rolling in front of his eyes whenever he experiences a moment of insight or personal growth. But *Bojack Horseman* itself expresses a violent structural opposition to the possibility of episodic resolution. One of the ways in which it does this is through an intense commitment to continuity between episodes. During an alcoholic blackout, Bojack steals the 'D' from the Hollywood sign (season 1, episode 6), and in all subsequent episodes the show's characters universally refer to the neighbourhood as 'Hollywoo', even as the major narrative repercussions of Bojack's theft fade away. Minor details persist determinedly through entire seasons — Bojack hits a deer with his car (season 2, episode 4), and his broken windscreen persists stubbornly through several episode breaks.⁴ Training montages decay into distraction or hopelessness, refusing to make the hard work of self-improvement easier by means of temporal manipulation. The message is clear: resolution is not easily achieved; things remain broken. Nevertheless, despite the show's remarkable willingness to follow this committed refusal of resolution into disturbing plots involving abuse, irrevers-

3 *Full House*, created by Jeff Franklin (ABC, 1987–1995).

4 Compare this with a telling moment in *The Simpsons*, created by Matt Groening (Fox Broadcasting, 1989–), 'Bart vs. Australia', season 6, episode 16, dir. by Wes Archer (aired on 19 February 1995), in which a clump of Bart's hair is shaved away by a boomerang, only to regrow apparently within seconds. This moment should not be regarded as simply an animator's continuity error, but rather as a reminder of how certain kinds of continuity and consequentiality are unimportant to the cultural project of *The Simpsons*.

ible cruelty, and the deaths of major characters, *Bojack Horseman* cannot function without signalling — perhaps even despite itself — at least the possibility of resolution over a longer arc by means of the redemption of its protagonist. Though the show offers a sharp, perceptive parody of the 22-minute resolution arc of the family sitcom, demonstrating the unsustainability of such a form when continuity of character and consequentiality of action are prioritized, we might ask whether the parody brings us any closer to a concept of resolution freed from all formal constraints. The repetitive satisfaction of the family sitcom is in a sense a deferral of any genuinely satisfying satisfaction, the deferral of a conclusive end. Seen in this light, *Bojack Horseman*'s refusal of resolution begins to look very similar to the family sitcom's use of 'fake' closure as a structuring principle. Moreover, perhaps *Bojack Horseman*'s rejection of episodic resolution misses the point, since it is so difficult to imagine a narrative text that could ever successfully refuse resolution in any strong sense: all narratives are finite (because they are specific), and as such have endings — endings to which meaning inevitably accrues. Even the most arbitrary endings imaginable — for example, those that occur on account of authorial death or abandonment — are easily, perhaps even inevitably, absorbed into discourses of resolution. In one of the most famous examples of inconclusive textuality, the final piece in Johann Sebastian Bach's monumental work *The Art of Fugue* (*Die Kunst der Fuge*) trails off unfinished, and in doing so leaves incomplete the tonal, rhetorical, and structural schemes of the piece, as well as the entire work. A note added by Bach's son in the autograph manuscript gravely informs the reader that 'over this fugue, where the name BACH is stated in

the countersubject, the author died.⁵ Loose ends are subsumed unavoidably into structures of meaning, whether by processes of commentary or extension. Today, performers of Bach's fugue either rely on speculative reconstructions of the piece's final synthesis of its themes, or solemnly enact its incomplete ending, but whether the piece stands as a monument to intricate schematism or a stark reminder of the hubristic danger of such projects, resolution — which I am beginning to define as the retrospective determination of the shape, and hence the meaning, of a textual iteration — is inescapable.

Bojack Horseman expresses a tension between, on the one hand, the recognition of the cynicism inherent in narrative structures of resolution, and on the other, what I claim is the impossibility of ever abandoning such structures. One of the great (yet largely uncelebrated) poems of the Middle Ages, Hue of Rotelande's *Ipomedon*, also explores the contradictions and difficulties involved in taking a position against resolution. In this work, written in England towards the end of the twelfth century, we are told about the deeds of the eponymous Ipomedon, a great knight, in fact the greatest in the world, who falls in love with a beautiful woman known as La Fiere ('The Proud One'). Because La Fiere is proud, she will only marry the best knight in the world, and we know that this is Ipomedon. However, La Fiere does not know this, because Ipomedon pretends to be a dandy, feigning a lack of interest in all courtly pursuits apart from hunting. La Fiere,

5 Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, MS Mus. ms. autogr. Bach P200/1, fascicle 3, p. 39: 'Ueber dieser Fuge, wo der Nahme B A C H im Contrasubject angebracht worden, ist der Verfaßer gestorben.' <https://www.bach-digital.de/rsc/viewer/BachDigitalSource_derivate_00062812/db_bachp0200-1_page039.jpg> [accessed 8 December 2018].

under pressure to find a husband who meets her stringent criteria, organizes a three-day tournament in which all of the best knights in the world will compete for the honour of marrying her. Ipomedon, for reasons that are never explained, decides to compete in a series of three different disguises, while pretending that he is out hunting instead of participating in the tournament. Ipomedon, in his various disguises, is victorious on each of the three days, and eventually reveals himself. La Fiere thus agrees to marry him — but Ipomedon decides, again, for reasons that are never explained, to continue his adventures across Europe for another three thousand lines, before finally marrying La Fiere at the very end of the poem.⁶

Ipomedon's structural peculiarity, its extended deferral of its own end, has a parodic force: one of the conceits of the text is to recognize that romances are much longer than they need to be, if romances are understood as texts which set up the conditions under which the best knight can marry the most beautiful woman. Ipomedon is the best knight in the world from the beginning of the poem, and could very quickly prove himself to be so. The text could therefore itself end very quickly with marriage and the promised reproduction of aristocratic virtue in the form of children. But *Ipomedon* is a very long text, and so too are romances generally. So, romance, a narrative mode in which very little happens in a certain sense of the word, must resort to narrative strategies of self-prolongation, whether

6 For the text of the poem, see *Ipomedon, poème de Hue de Rotelande*, ed. by A. J. Holden (Paris: Klincksieck, 1979). For a reading of *Ipomedon* that illuminates some aspects of my argument further, see Daniel Reeve, 'Queer Arts of Failure in Hue of Rotelande and Alan of Lille', in *Medieval Thought Experiments: Poetry, Hypothesis, and Experience in the European Middle Ages*, ed. by Philip Knox, Jonathan Morton, and Daniel Reeve (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), pp. 273–96.

these might be the graphic and detailed description of battles, or subplots only minimally consequential with respect to the broader narrative. *Ipomedon*'s parodic insight is to extend this self-prolongation in order to produce a text that is manifestly too long, and gleefully aware of being so.

Ipomedon ends with an elaborate allegorical conclusion in which an authorial voice appears to claim that the poem's perverse excesses are both exceptionally faithful to the demands of the narrative form of romance and to the desires of its audience. Baked into this accusation is of course a recognition that the poem's parody of romance operates by being, in a certain sense, a maximally successful one — one that extends a minimum amount of narrative material into a poem of nearly eleven thousand lines. *Ipomedon* recognizes that even its own scathing parody cannot avoid the resolution that it so compulsively and mockingly defers. Instead of showing us a romance without resolution, the parody is achieved by altering the balance of the text, the scale at which its structural features play out, in order to create a disproportionate monster.

The question remains: does scale make a difference? For the musicologist Robert Fink, it does. Fink's analysis of twentieth-century American minimal music alongside its historical contemporary and stylistic sibling disco produces an insight into the relationship between repetition and teleology (or resolution).⁷ Rejecting previous analyses of minimal music as being radically anti-teleological,⁸ Fink proposes instead a concept of

7 Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

8 The dominant account is that of Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, trans. by J. Hautekiet (New York: Broude, 1983); for a summary of Mertens' claims vis-à-vis musical teleology see Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, pp. 32–34.

'recombinant teleologies', in which a repetitive musical work performs 'goal-directedness [...] whenever and wherever it chooses; [maintaining] a distance and perhaps even ironic stance toward "traditional" teleological dictates even as it plays with their undeniably pleasurable aspects.'⁹ By 'detach[ing] teleology from form',¹⁰ a new way of understanding resolution emerges: not just an inevitable consequence of the punctuating effects of form (though it always remains this), but also a discursive tool capable of being used for any number of purposes.

Seen through a certain analytical lens, this is the move made by *Bojack Horseman*. Working in a form — the episodic animated television comedy — laden with strong expectations that its narrative resolutions will coincide neatly with the end of each episode, *Bojack* offers instead a teleology detached from its form, even if this teleology remains only a provisional rejection or deferral of the inevitable resolution that will accrue to its ending, even though *that* final resolution is, for the time being, a mirage, and remains available, even when enacted, for continuation, extension, and repetition.

This, then, is the 'catechontical' paradox of resolution.¹¹ All texts, always, are poised to end, and in doing so to perform the finality that is a precise consequence of their finitude. But, on the other hand, time refuses to do anything but carry on, leaving these objects always available for reiteration and continuation.

9 Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, p. 43.

10 Ibid., p. 46.

11 See Christiane Frey, 'Restrain', in this volume, for a discussion of 'catechontical' temporality.

Daniel Reeve, 'Resolution', in *Re-: An Errant Glossary*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 133–39 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-15_17>

REFERENCES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bach, Johann Sebastian, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, MS Mus. ms. autogr. Bach P200/1, fascicle 3, p. 39, <https://www.bach-digital.de/rsc/viewer/BachDigitalSource_derivate_00062812/db_bachp0200-1_page039.jpg> [accessed 8 December 2018]
- Fink, Robert, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005)
- Mertens, Wim, *American Minimal Music*, trans. by J. Hautekiet (New York: Broude, 1983)
- Reeve, Daniel, 'Queer Arts of Failure in Hue of Rotelande and Alan of Lille', in *Medieval Thought Experiments: Poetry, Hypothesis, and Experience in the European Middle Ages*, ed. by Philip Knox, Jonathan Morton, and Daniel Reeve (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), pp. 273–96
- Rotelande, Hue de, *Ipomedon, poème de Hue de Rotelande*, ed. by A. J. Holden (Paris: Klincksieck, 1979)

FILMOGRAPHY

- Bojack Horseman*, created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg (Netflix, 2014–)
- Full House*, created by Jeff Franklin (ABC, 1987–1995)
- Seinfeld*, created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld (NBC, 1989–1998)
- The Simpsons*, created by Matt Groening (Fox Broadcasting, 1989–)
- 'Bart vs. Australia', season 6, episode 16, dir. by Wes Archer (original air date: 19 February 1995)